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Green Light: The Christian Response to Environmental Concerns

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AIDS and the Seventh-day Adventist Health Care Institutions

Seventh-day Adventist hospitals and clinics should provide AIDS patients with compassionate, quality care. Careful attention should be given to developing and implementing procedures and policies which promote the safety of all patients and employees, minimising unnecessary exposure to HIV. Guidelines for preventing AIDS in medical institutions are available from Government sources and through the South Pacific Division Health Department.

AIDS and International Workers

Workers and volunteers assigned to fields outside their homeland should receive special training for medical problems in the countries where they will be serving, including AIDS education.

A Final Word About AIDS

In response to God's love, Seventh-day Adventists seek to view people suffering from AIDS through the eyes of Jesus. As the epidemic spreads, some people in the world may only see

its sufferers—as it once did lepers—as carriers of death, to be shunned and isolated. Jesus set a different example by showing acceptance and treating the people of His day with compassion. Jesus always distinguished between sin, which He never compromised, and care for the sinner, whom He always loved. Seventh-day Adventist Church members are to follow Christ's example in dealing with those who contract AIDS or sickness of any kind. ○

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Green Light: The Christian response to environmental concerns

By Howard J. Fisher

Time for 'stewards of
the earth' to speak
and act

Christians don't have a particularly good track record when it comes to concern for the environment. Caring for the planet has not featured prominently on the agenda of Christian churches. In fact, Lynn White¹⁸ has argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition, based on Genesis, has led to a disenchantment with and disdain for nature. He considered that the Christianised West views nature in a mostly anthropocentric and utilitarian way.

A recent survey conducted in Oklahoma showed that literal belief in the Bible was always correlated with a lower level of environmental concern.⁷ Granberg-Michaelson cited Kellert's survey, carried out at Yale, in which Kellert researched a variety of persons to discover their attitude towards the natural world,

and endeavoured to relate those attitudes to other characteristics and practices. Significantly, the more frequently a person attended religious services, the greater the probability that that person would have attitudes to nature that were dominating or even outrightly negative. Conversely, those who rarely or never attended religious services were much more likely to have what could be termed an ecological or naturalistic stance towards other creatures and the environment in general.

In the minds of many, Christianity is still the enemy. Carmody commented "...ecologists now call upon Christians to change the old image of 'subdue the earth'....Until it starts along this

path ... many ecologists will consider biblical religion a foe of the earth, a blind guide that has helped bring spaceship earth close to ditching."⁴

The current pressures on earth biophysical systems would seem to be the result of the combination of burgeoning world population and technological advancement. Although the technologically-advanced nations are mostly not the ones with rapidly expanding populations, their *per capita* environmental impact, and total impact, are far greater than that of the 'undeveloped' nations. The environmental crisis is largely the result of the utilisation of technology inappropri-

riately, ignorantly, or with disregard for its consequences. An example of the latter is the persistent use, until very recently, of chlorofluorocarbons—despite warnings of their potential danger to the ozone layer given twenty years ago.^{2, 11}

White argued that our modern technological capacities have developed in nations influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition which viewed the natural world as something to be dominated and subdued by humanity for its purposes. He wrote: "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious."¹⁸ Nash argued that even though Western society today is substantially secularised '... most Americans continue to derive their ideas of right and wrong, directly or indirectly, from one religion or another'.¹²

White, in fact, agreed that there was a Biblical basis for environmental responsibility. However, his argument was that for much of the Christian era, the text has not been read in that manner. Needless to say, his article has been an important catalyst for Christians to re-read the Scriptures. The dominion conferred in Genesis 1:28 has been reinterpreted to grant not despotism but trusteeship. The direction given in Genesis 2:15, 'to till it and keep it', is now seen to imply stewardship in a world that belongs to God.

Others, before White, have questioned Christian attitudes and advocated environmental responsi-

bility from a religious standpoint. In 1939, Walter Loudermilk made a speech on Jerusalem radio entitled 'The Eleventh Commandment' in which he advocated careful stewardship of Earth's soils, waters,

'When Jesus comes we should be found caring for our planet not helping the rest of the population destroy it'

forests and grazing lands (cited in Nash *op. cit.*¹²). Although perhaps forward-thinking for his time, Loudermilk's view was still naively anthropocentric—we had better look after the environment because if we don't we will suffer the consequences. Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler was among the first to go beyond this simple stewardship. He believed that the abuse of the

'... abuse of the environment [is] effectively an insult to the Creator'

environment was effectively an insult to the Creator, and that caring for the planet was a matter of obedience to God, not just providing for humanity's needs.¹⁷ Following him, Baer declared, '... wantonly to destroy the rational and holistic qualities of our environment is to sin against the very structure of the world which God has created'.¹

In 1970, Francis Schaeffer entered

the discussion: "It is the biblical view of nature that gives nature a value *in itself* ... because God made it.... This is the true Christian mentality (pp47-48).... What God has made, I, who am also a creature,

must not despise" (p 61).¹⁷

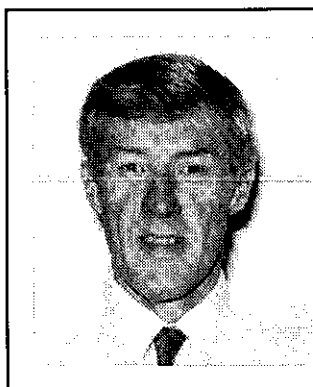
Schaeffer and Sittler agree that, in fact, 'all things' are potentially included in redemption. "In Him all things were created.... through him all things (to be reconciled) (Col 1:16-20). "... the creation itself will be set free from its

bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). Schaeffer went on to conclude that "... a truly biblical Christianity has a real answer to the ecological crisis ... it offers the hope here and now of substantial healing in nature of some of the results of the Fall ... the Church ought to be a 'pilot plant'...(exhibiting) ... through individual attitudes and

the Christian community's attitude ... that in this present life man can exercise dominion over nature without being destructive" (pp81-82).¹⁶

Christians may be seen by many to be so heavenly-minded as to be of no

earthly use ("This earth is not my home, I'm just a-passing through"). Seventh-day Adventists, in particular, with their eschatology involving a fiery obliteration of the present creation, might not be expected to have special concern for that which is to pass away, and soon. But Ness has countered: "When Jesus comes we should be found caring for our planet, not helping the rest of the population destroy it."¹³ In similar vein, the present writer has asked, if Christians today do not care for the earth, why should they expect God to turn them loose on a new one?⁶ God has promised to destroy those who destroy the earth (Rev 11:18). Greig declared, "Christians should believe that as stewards we are to take care of the earth until God acts to accomplish the second coming of Christ. Until that time we must let the moral and ethical conditioning of our faith—not what we think we



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know about the future of the earth, and the implications we draw from our thinking—guide us to proper environmental action.”⁸ Ness considered that ‘because of the grave environmental problems facing us, we must teach our young people about proper stewardship of the earth Christian education must instil in young people a profound respect for the world God has created and the skills to be faithful stewards of this God-given gift’.¹⁴

There is a trace of anthropocentrism in that last phrase but, nonetheless, Ness is one of a mere handful of Seventh-day Adventist writers attempting to draw the attention of the church to environmental concerns. Greig confessed that Adventists ‘...like the rest of the Christian world, have been more concerned about our own redemption than about the well-being of creation’.⁸ Very little appears in Adventist literature until the late 1980s (I recall a lone article, probably in *Review and Herald*, published about twenty years ago). There was a flurry of articles in *Signs* in the late ‘80s, written by Avondale College lecturers, and a few articles have appeared in the *South Pacific Record*, the latter attracting some negative responses from the readership.

Significantly, the delegates to the Annual Council of the Church held in October, 1992, produced a ‘Seventh-day Adventist Statement on the Environment’ entitled ‘Caring for Creation’. The statement proclaimed that Seventh-day Adventists hold ‘the preservation and nurture (of God’s creation) to be intimately related to our service to Him’, that ‘Sabbath observance underscores the importance of our integration with the total environment’, and that ‘our concern for the environment extends to personal health and lifestyle’. The statement further acknowledged that ‘human poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated’, thus adding a further dimension to our responsibility.

In January, 1993, *Spectrum* gave

some 23 pages to environmental concerns, Branson (editor) considering that ‘... the voices heard in this issue only begin the discussion’.³ Considering the small volume that precedes them in the Adventist literature, that is probably a fair comment. To be candid, the section, “What are Adventists *doing*?” left me responding, “Not a great deal.”

Seventh-day Adventists, with

‘Ozone depletion is just as hazardous as tobacco smoke’

their emphasis on the Sabbath as a memorial of Creation, their last-day message to worship the Creator (Rev 14:7), and their emphasis on physical health (ozone depletion is just as hazardous as tobacco smoke), logically should be at the forefront of environmentally-concerned people. When the natural environment is seen as Creation, there can be no alternative. Klotz summarised the logic of the Creationist position (sorry about the gender-bias): ‘the consistent creationist is an environmentalist because he recognises God as his Creator and the Creator of everything The creationist seeks to preserve the good world over which God made him steward’.⁹

One factor which may have worked against Adventists’ embracing environmental concerns is the association in the minds of many with the New Age movement. This suspicion is shared by many Christians, as Sheldon has discussed.¹⁵ Adventist geographer, Lockton, aware of New Age and pantheistic phobias, concluded that “We should be green in the sense of caring for God’s creation, but we should also carefully evaluate contemporary green philosophies and reject concepts that are not biblical. As Christians we should clearly articulate and *practice* our green concern so that those disillusioned with secular humanism can see Christianity as a valid and coherent alternative to the New Age

movement’s response to the environment.”¹⁰

Sheldon found that ‘...although the Church is beginning to awaken to its role of earthkeeping, it has produced few recognised leaders in the environmental field. Most see the Church as a latecomer that is still struggling to climb aboard the environmental wagon when, in reality, it should be the driver’.¹⁵

The church has been given the green light. It is time to go ahead. ○

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